DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 984 CE 060 597

AUTHOR Whyte, Ann
TITLE The Clothes Line. Airing Equity Challenges for ACE.
PUB DATE Sep 91
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
JOURNAL CIT Adult Ed News; p3-5 Sep 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Accreditation (Institutions); *Adult Education; Articulation (Education); *Community Education; Correctional Education; Credits; Disabilities; Educational Opportunities; Educational Quality; *Extension Education; Federal Aid; Foreign Countries; Limited English Speaking; Nontraditional Education; Professional Development; Rural Areas; Transfer Policy; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

Along with schooling, technical and further education, and higher education, adult and community education (ACE) forms part of the framework of lifelong education. It makes a major contribution to the social justice performance of postsecondary education by catering to adults who cannot gain access to or succeed in mainstream postsecondary education. Special populations that ACE reaches are as follows: women; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; prisoners; aboriginal people; people living in small, isolated, and remote communities; and people with disabilities. Policy issues that face ACE include the need for guaranteed and ongoing government funding and fair and reasonable wages for workers, predominantly women, in part-time employment. Equitable fee policies and clear guidelines about areas of ACE activity that are fee exempt must be developed. This policy must be developed within a framework of affordability as distinct from cost recovery. The area of articulation, accreditation, and credit transfer presents a huge challenge for ACE. Courses must be presented in a way that assists learners in getting recognition for their learning. Government policy is necessary to ensure availability of ACE opportunities to adults throughout Australia. Finally, adult educators must look after their own lifelong needs for professional development to make sure they provide a high quality service. (YLB)

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THE CLOTHES LINE

AIRING EQUITY CHALLENGES FOR ACE

ANN WHYTE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This talk is called the clothes line, partly because I sat and wrote it in the Melbourne winter sun, behind the trellis, next to compost heaps and under the Hills Hoist, as the warmest spot in the garden on a blustery winter day. And partly because the equity challenges that face adult and community education (ACE) are as varied and as numerous as the washing on the line.

I doubt that what I have to say will be new to you, but I think it is useful to systematically record current issues – to do a kind of equity stocktake of ACE.

1. Recognition of ACE within a framework of life-long education

For a while now, the AAACE has been describing ACE as the fourth educational sector. It sits with schooling, TAFE and Higher Education. While there is overlap with the other sectors, we have said it is a sector in its own right.

At the boundary with schooling and ACE we have basic education and courses for adults to complete years 11 and 12.

At the boundary with TAFE we have a huge array of access, bridging, personal development and technical skill courses.

At the boundary with higher education we have literature, history, philosophy and languages, social and pure sciences courses.

ACE is also active in the community, in arts, cultural activities, social movements, industry training, politics, health education, community life and so on.

The whole picture is about lifelong education.

2. The social justice education sector

The AAACE has argued that we make a major contribution to the social justice performance of post-secondary education. We cater, far more than any other sector, for adults who are't confident, adults who, for whatever reason, cannot gain access or do not succeed in mainstream post-secondary education.

3. Women

Through local community-based centres we reach lots of women including those who are at home during the day. To do this we have overcome some of the well-known deterrents to participation. Local ACE centres are friendly and informal places to enter. They are mainly staffed by women, many offer childcare, their programs are designed to interest women and accommodate demands on their time.

The development of local community-based centres is a remarkable phenomenon, and one we can be proud of. People in local communities, and in this case mainly women, have used their collective effort, energy, communication and organisational skills to create these centres. Their growth, against formidable odds of non-recognition and no or few government resources in some states, is testimony to their relevance. The strongly felt need for such centres is not confined to some states or locations. People create them in the heart of cities, in the suburbs, in large and small country centres.

While catering for women, the daytime programs offered by these centres also attract older people, people with disabilities and retrenched and injured workers. Those with night and weekend programs attract a full mix of people.

I believe part of the success of community-based centres occurs for an obvious but often overlooked reason – their focus is on the individual. People commonly say that they reach people who otherwise don't participate in education because they are small and friendly and I'm sure this is so. But this can't be the only reason they appeal to women. Supermarkets are not small, nor all that friendly, yet women are not deterred from going shopping. In fact, many enjoy it. Thus I don't think size and informality are adequate explanations. What we do have in common with supermarkets is a primary focus on the person. Supermarkets, like local ACE centres, focus on individuals. They and we want the individual to come in, to enjoy what is on offer – the customer is the raison d'être. This is not the case for the higher education sector, nor the training sector. In this, more than anything else, lies the secret for our success, and our greatest challenges.

When people choose the programs we offer because it is just what they want, we're winning, but when they choose because of a lack of opportunity elsewhere, we're filling a gap and maybe doing little else. →

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In other words, I don't think we can rest on our laurels. Where what we offer is a good quality, customed designed program that is what the participants want, we're ahead. When people participate because, for whatever reason, we're offering the only thing they can afford, or fit in, we must not abdicate our responsibility to keep pressure on other sectors to change and to make sure our participants have access to a full range of educational opportunities.

4. People from non-English speaking backgrounds

I think participation in ACE by NESB people is generally not as high as we would like. For programs such as English as a Second Language courses, demand often outstrips the places available. But overall, I think we only reach disadvantaged NESB people when special outreach efforts are made. Door knocking with first language outreach workers, social groups for older migrant women and men, retraining courses for retrenched and injured workers, cultural events and festivals have all been successful, but are not sufficiently part of our mainstream activities. We need resources to reach out. We should not be too shy to say so nor to seek them. There is growing awareness about the monolingual myopia of many Australians. We need to make sure that local ACE centres reach people other than white Anglo-Saxon Australians.

5. Prisoners

The AAACE network of prisoner educators provides a vital link between these professionals. Prison educators themselves are a dedicated and inventive group, seeking to open up education opportunities for offenders in, sometimes, unsympathetic environments.

6. Aboriginals – the Murri and Koori people and Torres Straight islanders

The role of ACE in the empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal people is fraught with difficulties. Recently, Lillian Holt, the Aboriginal principal of the Aboriginal College in South Australia, returned from a study trip in the United Kingdom. She phoned me to say that it had been a worthwhile experience and that of all her extra activities she was more convinced than ever that adult education was relevant to Aboriginal people. While it is not surprising that ACE is relevant, the differences between Black and White value systems, learning styles and modes of expression are great. To quote from the draft of the current AAACE project on Skills Formation: "These differences cause serious inner conflicts for Aboriginal adult educators, who work to Black objectives within white institutions and social systems, and who point out rather wryly that the systems don't work all that well even for Whites."

7. People living in small, isolated and remote communities

Some of the happiest times of my life and the most interesting have been gained while living and working in remote communities, in places like Rosebery in Tasmania and Wallaroo in South Australia. But I was not born in these places and did not grow up in them. Thus I did not experience the way they also limit opportunities.

Some of the most vigorous ACE in Australia takes place in county centres. Exemplary social justice projects like Farm Gate Learning and the Mobile Childcare bus are programs created by rural adult and community educators to overcome equity issues. Queensland has taken the initiative to overcome the disadvantages of isolation a step further than the other states.

I hope the Open Learning Centres develop as vital ACE centres and open up opportunities for both formal and non-formal education in a way that we have never managed before. While distance education has been with us for a long time it has usually been provided as an outreach service from major cities. The Open Learning Centres break with this tradition by creating a focus in local towns. It is too soon to say just how important this will be. My guess is that it will prove to be very important. While people in remote areas focus on the city and their distance from it, they will , by definition, remain in an inequitable position. If, however, they focus on their own region, this inequity may be overcome.

8. People with disabilities

Again ACE has provided exemplary programs that offer opportunities to people with disabilities. Programs like Learning for the Less Mobile are successful but they require additional resources and we're duty bound to keep seeking these.

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Having looked at a stocktake of equity issues in ACE according to some different groups in society, or, to go back to my clothesline analogy, different garments on the line, I will now consider ACE equity issues from a policy point of view – to look at the linen and large items.

9. Government funding

First, let's look at funding. ACE in Victoria (where it is possibly better funded than anywhere in Australia) received $37m of direct government support for a sector that provides 11m student contact hours annually. This is less than it costs for a large university to function for a month. I'd don't want to suggest that ACE and university education need the same or even comparable levels of support from government, but it does illustrate the enormity of the gap and serves to remind us that the funds we seek are humble amounts indeed in the full order of things.

I have a very simple and clear view of government policy with regard to funding for ACE. While we must continue to define and describe the sector, it is here to stay. Community based ACE centres need funding for core operating activities in just the same way as the other sectors. This funding should be guaranteed and ongoing. Accountability for its expenditure should occur through normal reporting procedures.

10. Industrial issues

While I think the sector, like schools, will always attract and provide interesting opportunities for volunteers, there is no earthly reason why workers in the sector should not be paid fair and reasonable wages, like workers in another education sector.

The sector is predominantly staffed by women in part-time employment, one of the groups of workers commonly abused within the overall wages system.

11. The User Pays principle and cost recovery

The sector has traditionally charged fees for some activities and not for others. This should continue. There is a lot of work in front of us to develop equitable fees policies and clear guidelines about areas of ACE activity that are fee exempt.

This policy must be developed within a framework of affordability as distinct from cost-recovery.

I will explain why this is an important distinction. Cost-recovery policies have the potential to gentrify ACE by raising fees to a level beyond the reach of many people. Cost-recovery also has the potential to double tax people by charging the individuals for costs that are already paid for through taxation. For example, school, TAFE and Higher Education buildings are paid for through our taxes. If they are hired out, the people paying for the hiring are paying for something they have already paid for through the taxation system.

A policy of affordability assumes the goal is to make it available to everyone and that funding of ACE is to remain co-operative, with contributions coming from government and individuals.

Adult Basic Education, up to and including Year 10, should be provided for by government. Over the next few years, this criteria should be extended to include Year 11 and 12 education. Within this time, special initiatives in languages, mathematics and science will be needed to overcome a retarding skills deficit in the current adult population. Full and part time courses will be needed. They can be provided through senior secondary colleges, as institutions in their own right and through ACE centres, TAFE colleges and other educational institutions. This area of ACE policy, where the curriculum is equivalent to school level curriculum, needs to be cognate with the universal nature of school policy.

12. Articulation, accreditation and credit transfer

This area presents a huge challenge for ACE. On one hand, we don't want learner centered curriculum distorted to fit into the formal system where much of the curriculum is teacher centered. On the other hand, it is inequitable to leave our learners as second rate citizens in terms of non-recognition of their learning and competencies.

The trend towards an emphasis on outcomes from learning, on competency, is to our advantage. It is challenging the concept that the only way to learn is through time-based units of study in formal education institutions. We need to develop skills to express ACE learning in terms of outcomes and to provide opportunities for our learners to be able to illustrate these outcomes in ways that enable formal educational institutions and employers to give them credit. Systems of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and Competency Based Training (CBT) provide some of the ways forward.

In Victoria, the CAE has won a small national grant to develop a self-assessment kit for clerical workers. The aim is to enable them to identify their skills and see where they fit in terms of the Clerical and Administrative Officers Award. Student portfolios that give an employer or formal educational institution insight into a person's capacity are another part of the picture.

All in all, we need to increase our efforts in these areas. And for those of you horrified by the idea of accreditation or recognition of ACE learning, don't despair, because, as I said at the beginning of this section, I don't believe that our learner centered curriculum should be distorted, but I think we are obliged to present our courses in a way that will assist our learners to get recognition for their learning if they want it.

I have defined five distinct stages on the accreditation continuum and the bulk of our work is at the first stage.

- Evidence of enrolment – the institution, course name and duration.
- Evidence of attendance.
- Description of curriculum.
- Evidence of what was learnt either attested to by the tutor, self-tested or tested or recorded (RPL) in some other way.
- Evidence of what was learnt by testing against formally recognised standards authorised by a duly constituted accrediting body.

13. Availability of ACE and information about ACE

The opportunity to participate in ACE varies quite inequitably according to where an individual lives. Like schooling, government policy is necessary to make sure that there are ACE opportunities available to adults throughout Australia. Adult Education Radio makes a major contribution and for some situations may be the only way to ensure opportunity is available. It needs to be supported and expanded.

14. Quality

The user pays system ensures a degree of minimum quality but we need to be careful and vigilant. Full fee paying students have clearly lifted the game in some higher education institutions – lecturers arriving late to classes without well prepared lessons and the right number of handouts are exposed as not providing the commodity that has been purchased. Our problems are less of this order and more to do with the depth and breadth of the content of courses and the skills of teachers and tutors as excellent facilitators of learning.

I believe we can and should increase professional development opportunities for adult educators – after all, we are experts in providing short course education for everyone else. How many of you have attended a professional development activity on adult learning methods this year?

Many of us teach, almost all of us organise programs for others. There are lots of new things happening in adult learning. We need to apply our rhetoric to ourselves and make sure we look after our own lifelong needs for professional development, to make sure we provide a high quality service.

I have identified 14 equity issues for ACE. They are as varied as the items on a washing line, all important, all different. We need to keep a high level of awareness about equity. We need to make sure that, as our sector grows, we strive to reach everyone and do not leave any socks to grow smelly in the bottom of the basket. ●